New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

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NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Angel in the Pawnshop"

Daily Mirror

January 19, 1951

'Angel in Pawnshop' Has Many Good Moments

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The trouble with "Angel in the Pawnshop" is that it never quite makes up its mind whether it wants to be farce or fantasy. It has many beguiling and some touching moments, but never succeeds in establishing a single, completely satisfying mood. It is by turn poetic and literal. In its more literal episodes, it takes on the quality of a burlesque skit in a musical revue.

In the new arrival at the Booth Theatre, A. B. Shiffrin displays admirable imagination, if not effective discipline. He has penned just such a comedy as Bill Saroyan might in one of his less inspired periods. And, like Saroyan, Shiffrin loves people, even bad people.

The play revolves around Hilary, a philosophic Irish pawnshop proprietor. To his museum of fascinating gimcracks, souvenirs of happiness and tragedy, of pomp and poverty, comes a moonstruck girl fleeing from a gangster husband. She had known Hilary years before when she was a neighborhood child seeking escape from reality among his musty and dusty treasures.

The girl has retained her illusions, though they have been a little tarnished by her adult associations. She insists on living in a 16th Century world, a Golden Age of knights, romance and nobility. Her dream world is finally shattered when her gangster husband is killed and she falls in love with a handsome, struggling young writer of the 20th Century. And realizes, as Hilary points out, that the Golden Age is always in the future.

Eddie Dowling and Anthony B. Farrell have given the comedy a delightfully atmospheric background.

Co-producer Dowling is the gentle, yet crotchety Hilary to the life. Joan McCrackin is appealing as the girl. Due to her ballet training, she moves with grace. She achieves enchanting pictorial effects.

Willie Lewis, as a hep musician; Herbert Evers, as a hopeful writer; and Joesph Lautner, as a tyro physician, are good. However, John Farrell, as a Leon Erroll-like drunk, and Elizabeth Kerr, as an impossible literary agent, strike false notes. Clark Williams fails to make the pretty-boy killer sufficiently menacing.

John Larson's direction isn't able to overcome the deficiencies in the Shiffrin script. And that's regrettable, for the Booth's new tenant has so much to recommend it that you cannot help wishing it had enough.

"ANGEL IN THE PAWNSHOP"

Comedy by A. B. Shiffrin; staged by John Larson; setting and costumes by John Blankenchip; presented by Eddie Dowling and Anthony B. Farrell at the Booth Theatre, January 18, 1951. The cast:

Hilary.....Eddie Dowling
Tom.....John Farrell
Danny O'Keefe..Clark Williams
Lizzie Shaw...Joan McCracken
Drunk.....John Farrell
Duke Jones.....Willie Lewis
Timothy Spangle..Herbert Evers
Joe.....Joseph Lautner
Young Man.....Arthur Oshlag
Priscilla Nash..Elizabeth Kerr

DAILY NEWS

January 19, 1951

'Angel in the Pawnshop' Charming Fantasy in the Dowling Tradition

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The present-day theatre, which is very careful and quite prosaic, should always give thanks for and thanks to Eddie Dowling, a Broadway mystic who stubbornly holds to the belief that gentle souls and warm hearts count for something upon a stage. Eddie goes along ignoring the main chance of the obvious clickeroo and keeps looking for another William Saroyan, Tennessee Williams or Philip Barry who might have a new playscript that looks different. So, last evening at the Booth Theatre, Mr. Dowling and his valiant co-producer, Anthony B. Farrell, presented "Angel in the Pawnshop," by A. B. Shiffrin.

So here, once again, are gentle souls and warm hearts. The play is a fantasy set in a hockshop run by an Irish pawnbroker—fantasy enough for a starter. Into this shop come the people one might expect there—a writer who has hocked his typewriter, a Negro jazzman who has pledged his clarinet, a drunk who parts with timepieces ranging in size up to railroad station clocks, a young interne who wants to earn a microscope, a hoodlum looking for a heist . . . and a girl.

Miss McCracken Enchants.

A sweet, odd girl. She loves the shop for its treasures and the proprietor for his tolerant affection. She would much rather have lived in the Sixteenth Century, when life was simple and there were no machines, and she'd much rather have been Queen Elizabeth than an American lass named Lizzie Shaw. Here in the shop are the costumes and coronets of the older time, and the chief little problem of the play is to get Lizzie out of these trappings and into the year 1951 long enough to marry the young writer who hasn't the money to redeem his typing machine, but who is allowed by the proprietor to use it on the premises.

I would not say that Mr. Shiffrin's comedy is as compact and captivating a fantasy as "The Time of Your Life" or "On Borrowed Time," but practically all of it strikes me as being human and humorous and the production is admirable. Joan McCracken is enchanting as the girl, whether she is dancing to the music of one of her daydreams or trying nicely to be some help around the pawnshop. Mr. Dowling again so easily proceeds with his role that he doesn't seem to be acting at all. This has always been a most effective style, and it goes without saying that his portrait of an elderly Hibernian loan merchant with a mechanically bad heart is utterly engaging.

Fine Music and Setting.

The rest of the players all are interesting, from John Farrell, the drunk who claims that sober people have caused all the world's troubles, to Elizabeth Kerr, who, as a literary agent, gives the recipe for success in writing in one breathless speech. Every now and then Willie Lewis warms up his clarinet, which is splendid, and he acts nicely, too. Clark Williams looks like a Dick Tracy gone wrong as the hoodlum, and has the proper menace. Herbert Evers and Joseph Lautner are pleasant as the writer and the interne.

Musically and visually, "Angel in the Pawnshop" is superb. Will Irwin has written strange and haunting snatches of melody and rhythm as a fitting background for a play which is only half prosaically real. A newcomer to the ranks of stage designers, John E. Blankenchip, who is on the drama staff of Sarah Lawrence College, has devised a magical and delightful pawnshop setting and has lighted it with a rare instinct for the right effects. John Larson, the director, has kept the fantasy moving smoothly.

Miss McCracken fled to Mr. Dowling's shop to get away from this troublesome world for a while. You might like to visit the place, too, for the same reason. It's nice to feel nice now and then.

The New York Times

January 19, 1951

Eddie Dowling and Joan McCracken Appear in A. B. Shiffrin's 'Angel in the Pawnshop'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

If there were no dialogue in "Angel in the Pawnshop," which opened at the Booth last evening, there is no telling how enchanting it might be. For A. B. Shiffrin's notion of setting a whimsical play in a pawnshop and using it as a magic world is altogether attractive. In many respects the production is lovely and captivating.

Any scene designer worth his license ought to pay a little for the pleasure of making a pawnshop setting and filling it with treasure. Whatever terms he may have worked on, John E. Blankenchip has acquitted himself nobly. Old Man Hilary's caravansary for second-hand articles is beautifully planned, beautifully lighted and stocked with goods worthy of the eastern argosies.

* * *

There is also incidental music in "Angel in the Pawnshop." For the story Mr. Shiffrin has to tell is a capricious one. The street door opens to music; once or twice a music-box is opened, and there are daintily-scribbled interludes all the way through. Like Mr. Blankenchip, Will Irwin has acquitted himself nobly. There is a lot of entrancing orchestral music written simply and imaginatively. Since Willie Lewis is a member of the cast, there is also some rich clarinet playing by an honest and incandescent virtuoso.

Unless a writer has style and ideas, he would do well not to accept the challenge of music in the theatre, for music is the pithiest and most eloquent way of expressing imaginative ideas. The simple truth is that the poetic attitude in "Angel in the Pawnshop" requires finer writing than Mr. Shiffrin has brought to it.

He has put together a fable about a winning young lady who takes refuge from the world in Old Man Hilary's pawnshop and tries to live a sixteenth-century life. Since all the young men who are Hilary's clients naturally fall in love with her, they try to bring her up to the twentieth century; and since all whimsical plays have to end happily, they finally succeed.

Mr. Shiffrin has also a number of philosophical ideas to insert in the story. But it is to be feared that, on the one hand, he has not been able to make a coherent or meaningful fantasy out of his fable; and on the other hand, he does not write with genuine poetic flavor. He lacks the exuberance of the Saroyan who wrote "The Time of Your Life." He lacks the exaltation of the Giraudoux who wrote "The Madwoman of Chaillot." His fancies are pretty earthy ones, and his old-fashioned heroine unfortunately bears less resemblance to Peter Pan than to a case of arrested development.

* * *

Although John Larson has arranged a number of charming scenes in the stage direction, he has not been able to give much form to the performance. All this is a pity, for Eddie Dowling as the old pawnshop keeper has a warm sentimentality that we could use in the theatre and be grateful for. Or, at any rate, we could be grateful for half as much as he gives us. Eddie does lack a certain austerity.

And Joan McCracken is a beguiling creature when she has an intelligible part and is properly directed. Lacking that discipline, there is an unbecoming cuteness about her pawnshop angel. She moves across the stage lightly and sweetly. But, like Mr. Dowling, she would be twice as good if she were half as ingratiating.

Herbert Evers, Clark Williams and Joseph Lautner do well with the parts of other pawnshop clients; and John Farrell draws abundant entertainment out of the helter-skelter part of a loquacious gentleman with a good skinful.

"Angel in the Pawnshop" is the sort of original and kind-hearted improvisation that a theatregoer would enjoy enjoying. Unfortunately, it needs more genius to be wholly enchanting.

New York World-Telegram and The ~~Herald~~ Sun

January 19, 1951

'Pawnshop's' a Place To Hock Dreams

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Modern fable
Topic—Pursuit of happiness
Mood—Imaginative
Credit—Niceness
Debit—Coyness
I find it—Attractive, wispy.

Every human effort possible has been exerted to make "Angel in the Pawnshop" an enchanting little fantasy about the assertion of man's better instincts. It almost, but never quite, comes off.

There is a lot of charm in this play, innate cleanliness, and a springy innocence of the way most people behave. But it is verbose and the writing is too often affected without being original, inspired or poetic.

A pawnshop is suddenly visited with new life by the return of a young girl who lived above the place as a child. She had had the worst of a lonely life, now she flees from a terrifying platonic marriage to a brutal killer.

Warehouse for Dreams.

The old owner of the place lets her move in and run his life and business. She spends most of her time mooning and dancing around dressed up in hocked ballgowns.

The place becomes a haven where people store the material symbols of their greatest ambitions. A young writer uses his typewriter. A musician comes in to play his clarinet. A doctor is gradually buying equipment by giving the broker free examinations.

The girl insists that she is escaping to the past. Clearly if allowed, she would go entirely off the beam through fear. With her costumes, music boxes and colored glass lampshades, she manages to create an entirely fantastic world.

Finally she is released to marry the young writer. The gangster tries to carry her off but is killed in a fight that promises to finish the old man, too.

Against the Rules.

This does not seem to me a play with a purpose other than to remind you that there can be a great deal of good acting instinctively, in defiance of "civilized" rules.

The play's major fault is that in an effort to avoid the conventional, it becomes precious. A character never just says "the city," but strains for a metaphor like "this bustling Bagdad." Unless such language glitters with lyrical charm or startling imagery, it can become downright exasperating.

The performers frequently drop into a habit of singing in imitation of poetry. This is fatal to the sense of their lines. Ignoring punctuation, so that whole sentences and different ideas run together, without pause or alteration of tone, does not make poetry where there was none to begin with.

Deliberate Immaturity.

Eddie Dowling is as at home in the role of the pawnbroker, as he might be in an ancient sweater. He knows how to play it with such deceptive languor and lilt that we often find the other actors copying his intonations.

Joan McCracken is extraordinarily lovely as the slightly touched young visitor, particularly when she dances, which is most of the time.

My own feeling about the character she plays is, that on the stage, for a couple of hours, this girl is elusive and winning. Under any other circumstances, she would be irritating beyond measure.

She is one of those dainty escapists, wallowing in childish conceits, and flaunting her fragility. Her refusal to face facts is deliberately chosen immaturity. A fitting subject for a psychiatrist, she would bore the pants off you in an hour or two. Her refusal to call the police instead of risking four or five lives is cheesy gallantry.

Incidental Music.

That Miss McCracken does what she does with the character is remarkable.

Will Irwin has supplied music that runs straight through the play. For once such a score really is "incidental" instead of out to make a big impression. It has color and mood and always relates itself to the action.

"Angel in the Pawnshop"—*continued*

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune
January 19, 1951

By HOWARD BARNES

Rather Poor Collateral

A. B. SHRIFFIN'S "Angel in the Pawnshop," at the Booth, is a melodramatic fantasy with music in which some hot licks on a clarinet are by far the most pleasing interludes. The chief interpreters of the melange are Eddie Dowling, who plays a philosophical hockshop proprietor, and Joan McCracken, as a dalt stray who is forever meeting herself on an escalator, rushing into the sunrise, or taking an express to the sixteenth century. The former has much the better of it, singing Irish ballads, quoting Shakespeare and the Bible and making a semblance of sense in slipshod doings. Miss McCracken, when she is not executing a pas-de-deux or trying on fancy costumes, sticks to straight Shiffrin, which must be heard to be believed.

* * *

The clarinet tooting is done by Willie Lewis, who turns in some nice acting to boot. At odd intervals incidental music by Will Irwin and trick-lighting effects by John E. Blankenchip in his excellent setting are employed to accent the whimsical quality of the nonsense, but most of it remains sheer nonsense. There is a great deal of flowery talk about truth and beauty, the state of the world, sobriety, the manufacture of a literary celebrity and interment in the past, but it is loose and undramatic. The episodes of violence in which a gangster sweetheart of Lizzie keeps drawing a gun and finally takes a pot shot at the nice old pawnbroker, have no real integration in the plot, but they are welcome interruptions in the general balderdash.

* * *

Dowling has always fancied shows of this genre and he knows how to play them. For most of the time his Hilary is an engaging codger, letting a waif make his establishment a hide-away, permitting a writer to pound out a story on his hocked typewriter, or courageously confronting a killer His final death scene finds him going the way of the play, which is not good. Unfortunately Miss McCracken seems to be befuddled as well as bemused throughout "Angel in the Pawnshop." Her talents are established, but they are given small scope at the Booth.

* * *

Aside from Lewis and John Farrell, who has a few amusing moments as a drunk, the supporting company can only be described as inept. Herbert Evers is downright trying in the role of the author who courts Lizzie on a Staten Island ferry-boat and Joseph Lautner is barely adequate to the part of a medical student. A dull flash of satire is tossed in by Elizabeth Kerr, as a fast-talking literary agent, while Arthur Oshlag periodically gets dressed and undressed as a monthly allowance permits him to change from dungarees to tails. John Larson's direction does little to relieve the essential ennui of "Angel in the Pawnshop." It is a tedious theatrical what-not.

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New York Post
HOME NEWS
January 19, 1951

The Irish Pawnbroker and the Girl

By Richard Watts Jr.

Being something of an expert on the plays of William Saroyan, Eddie Dowling is offering, in lieu of a work from the hand of the Master, a Saroyan-esque comedy called "Angel in the Pawnshop," by A. B. Shiffrin, which opened at the Booth last night. Although a gentleman in his cups wanders through it, I think I am being fairly accurate in describing the new presentation as a sort of non-alcoholic "The Time of Your Life," less exuberant and generally delightful than the real thing by a considerable margin, but with a minor charm of its own.

Probably it is not being strictly correct to say that "Angel in the Pawnshop" is like something by Saroyan. Rather it is a comedy about some people who have apparently read several Saroyan plays and are bent on copying their dialogue and conduct from his manner. On the whole, they do it quite pleasantly, and, despite gunplay, there is an air of amiable sweetness about Mr. Shiffrin's work that makes it monstrous to be anything save kind to it. "Angel in the Pawnshop" is engaging, but I'm afraid it isn't exactly exhilarating.

The Pawnbroker

Instead of a barroom, the setting is, as you may conceivably have guessed, a pawnshop, and the proceedings are presided over, not by an expansively philosophical barfly, but by a kind-hearted Irish pawnbroker, who pretends to be gruff to his customers. The angel of the title is a dreamy, romantic girl, who lives in a hazy, sentimental past and is hiding from a homicidal gangster. Then there are a writer who has pawned his typewriter and a Negro musician who has pawned his clarinet, and they come to the pawnshop to use the instruments of their trade.

A couple of other fellows drop in from time to time, including an interne who gives the pawnbroker medical advice in return for various articles of his profession, and a tall young man who keeps changing back and forth between evening clothes and overalls. To complete the cast, there are a drunk who blames the ills of the world on sober people, and a lady literary agent who is convinced that the writer is a genius, and that gangster who finally manages to get himself shot. I liked things best when the musician was playing his clarinet.

Living in the Past

It seems to be the conviction of the pawnbroker and the writer that the girl is making a great mistake by living in the past and that she would be well advised if she faced reality boldly. I don't say they aren't right about it, but it struck me as rather odd that Mr. Shiffrin seemed to be on their side, since his play is chiefly devoted to revealing the superiority of the romantic imagination over the sordid realities of modern existence. Anyway, there is a nice sentimental glow to the comedy in a modest sort of way.

Mr. Dowling, of course, can play whimsical old fellows with authentic charm and remarkable conviction, and he achieves the feat of making the pawnbroker an almost believable figure. Joan McCracken has grace and humor as the angel, and is, naturally enough, particularly effective when she dances. Willie Lewis as the musician is first-rate in both his acting and his clarinet playing, and supplied me with my chief happiness of the evening. John E. Blankenchip's set is excellently atmospheric. But whatever became of Mr. Saroyan?

Journal American
January 19, 1951

Sincere Try Marred By Too Much Pixie

By John McClain

Eddie Dowling and the obsequious Anthony B. Farrell brought to the Booth Theatre last evening a production entitled "Angel in the Pawnshop," starring Mr. Dowling, featuring Joan McCracken and written by A. B. Shiffrin.

I should say that it gets too big for its britches, but with the qualification that it is an exceptionally ambitious and sincere effort all the way, that much of the writing is distinguished and that the production and performances are uniformly laudable.

It bogs down, I believe, because of an overwhelming preoccupation with whimsy and an equal effort to reduce most of the woes of the world to the simple locale of a pawn shop.

Mr. Shiffrin tells the story of a lovable and elderly hock shop proprietor, Mr. Dowling, who provides a haven for Miss McCracken, an entrancing young lady who is being pursued by a ruthless gangster to whom she has just given a large consignment of air.

Here in the quaint surroundings of the pawnshop she meets and falls in love with Herbert Evers, a budding author. The menacing ex-boy-friend inevitably finds her and closes in, but the forces of Right, namely Dowling, Evers and a Negro clarinet player, Willie Lewis, save the situation two minutes and forty seconds short of the final whistle.

Mr. Dowling missed the point after touchdown, but that didn't matter because RIGHT had a safe margin of victory anyway.

That seems to be a thoroughly straightforward and workable story line, perhaps a bit thin here and there, but the fact is that it is so cluttered with declamation and allegory that one would not have been too alarmed if Jean Arthur had suddenly come through the front window on wires, quoting Proust.

For reasons which escaped me, Miss McCracken is possessed with a delusion that she is living in the Elizabethan era, and her speech is correspondingly formal. This, despite the fact that she admittedly had a prolonged episode with Clark Williams, the hoodlum who pursues her.

I would like to hear a tape recording of their conversation those long winter nights when they were on the lam from his latest caper.

Then, when it becomes obvious that the villain, a known murderer, is coming to get her there is an unaccountable reluctance to call the cops.

• • •

Right Is Might

Seventeen thousand gendarmes are looking for this fellow but Miss McCracken will not tip them off because he was "so nice to her." She won't even let lovable Mr. Dowling lift the receiver off the hook.

The whole thing, of course, proves that right is might and the bandits, thieves and dictators of this world finally get their just desserts, despite the ameliorating efforts of angels like Miss McCracken.

While speaking of Miss McCracken I should say that she has established herself in this, her first non-dancing role, as an actress of rare ability and promise.

Mr. Dowling is constantly charming and proficient, as he has been these many years and I was particularly fascinated by Willie Lewis, the Negro who blows a fine solo clarinet and also plays his part with great humor and conviction.

The incidental music by Will Irwin does its best for the mood of the proceedings and John E. Blankenchip has devised a suitably pixie one-set pawnshop.

Maybe that's what I didn't like —too much pixie.

"Four Twelves Are 48"

Journal American

January 18, 1951

A Lot of Fine Talent Is Badly Misused

By JOHN McCLAIN

It is difficult for me to understand how so much proven talent—production, writing, direction and acting—could have been so unhappily concentrated on "Four Twelves Are 48," the quote new comedy unquote which opened at the Forty-Eighth Street Theatre last night.

The producers, Mssrs. Aldrich and Myers, have exhibited immaculate good taste in the past; the author, Joseph Kesselring has proven his ability with "Arsenic And Old Lace"; Otto Preminger, the director, needs no introduction either here or in Hollywood, and the cast, from Anne Revere and Ernest Truex to Hiram Sherman, Doro Merande and Pat Crowley have established their proficiency previously and with better effect.

Yet they all managed to get together to present a show which, almost from the moment the opening curtain rang up, assailed my extremely tattered sense of good manners and morals.

I think it is quite possible, as with "Arsenic and Old Lace," to devise a great comedy about a couple of old dolls who like to poison people. But here the premise is that every female member of a family gives birth to an illegitimate offspring at the age of 12.

One idea is so macabre and off-center that it can become hilarious; this one struck me as being slightly soiled. In any case, it wasn't THAT funny.

Anne Revere, descendant of an Osage Indian, is living happily and in comfort in a New York house with her daughter (born out of wedlock when she was 12; the daughter's daughter (born out of wedlock when she was 12), and HER daughter, aged 12.

There is an agent, Ludwig Donath, who wants to marry Miss Revere; Hiram Sherman, who wants to marry the daughter when he discovers he is the father of HER daughter and, whew! Joshua Shelley, who wants to marry the great grand-daughter.

Then there is Ernest Truex, rich Uncle Snake Tooth, who arrives in a Rolls Royce straight from the reservation in Oklahoma and spends the rest of the evening saying "Ugh" and cooking raw meat in the living room fireplace and uttering various expletives which, I thought, ran thin as the evening did likewise.

Of course Pat Crowley, the 12-year-old, thinks she is also inceinte, but I hardly need to tell you that this proves to be false.

I didn't think that the idea that everybody has a casual child at the age of 12 was hilarious enough to carry the evening, and I never quite believed that these people had actually been guilty of such dalliance in the first place. Mr. Truex, much as I love him, never sold himself to me as a real Indian.

The whole piece is admirably mounted and I thought the performances of Miss Revere, Mr. Sherman, Mr. Donath, Misses Merande and Crowley were expert and deserved a better fate.

There are many times when you laugh uproariously, in spite of yourself, realizing afterward that it was only because an old Indian said "Nuts" at an incongruous moment in an inplausible setting.

But there are unfortunately too few of these moments to keep "48" at the Forty-Eighth Street Theatre for a protracted time.

"FOUR TWELVES ARE 48"

Comedy by Joseph Kesselring; staged by Otto Preminger; scenery by Raymond Sovey; costumes by Peggy Morrison; presented by Richard Aldrich and Richard Myers with Mr. Preminger and Julius Fleischmann at the 48th Street Theatre, January 17, 1951. The cast:

Rose Bolton, Ph. D.....Rosetta Le Noire
Dorothy "Doddie" Bawke...Pat Crowley
Jerry Morgan.....Billy James
Philippa "Phil" Bawke.....Jane Du Frayne
Mischa Cohn....Joshua Shelley
Anton Allerman-Spaacher...Ludwig Donath
Mrs. Kelly.....Mrs. Priestly Morrison
Uncle Snake Tooth..Ernest Truex
Nellie Bawke.....Anne Revere
Calendula Watkins.....Eulabelle Moore
Mary Bawke.....Ruth Taylor
Philip Dupre...Hiram Sherman
Jane Dupre.....Doro Merande
Joe Hungry Horse...Royal Dano
"Dr." Jason P. Berrystone...Morton L. Stevens

Synopsis: The entire action of the play takes place during early spring in the New York home of Nellie Bawke. Act I. Late afternoon. Act II. Morning of next day. Act III. The following morning.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 18, 1951

Humor Is Different In 'Four Twelves'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Comedy.
Topic—American Indians.
Theme—Young motherhood.
Virtue—Originality.
Clue—Topsy turvy morals.
Has—Lavish tantalizing humor.

If "Four Twelves Are 48" strikes you as a novel title, that is only a beginning. Its idea is fresh. Its performance is unusual. Its wit is reserved.

Its whole manner is that of a gracious hostess intent on ignoring her inebriated husband who has come to the dinner table nude. The play is often outrageous, but spins merrily on looking the other way.

The bare bones of the plot are startling. Four romances are perused and concluded in the course of the play. The females in question are four generations of the same American Indian family. The oldest is 48, and none of them was formally wed when producing.

Youngest in Trouble.

The particular story springs from the efforts of the women to tell the youngest the facts of life. The head of the family is a successful singer, and headquarters are in Manhattan. The girls' new sophistication makes them reticent about the origin of new generations. Logically enough, the youngest, currently 12, assumes that she is in the traditional family condition.

Settling her problem occupies the family concurrently with its effort to buy a handsome Long Island estate. There it will establish a haven for troubled women of all kinds.

Much of the humor springs from the character of Snake Tooth, grandly played by Ernest Truex, and the casual way he brings his teepee to Gotham. He sleeps on the floor and roasts steaks in the fireplace. He has $10,000,000 from Oklahoma oil and a Rolls Royce with a built-in bathroom. From an enemy red man he learns to eat library paste, and suggests that a Chihuahua might prove juicy.

Situation Humor.

The comedy never slings gags at you. This is situation humor with payoff lines that as often let you relish them slowly, as make you burst out laughing at them. Much of the play's delight comes from very Indian statelinesa just when the play is maddest.

Anne Revere is strikingly handsome as the contralto great grandmother, and a tower of placid strength and cold rage, in her tribe. Pat Crowley makes an entrancing 12-year-old.

Of the various suitors, Hiram Sherman is vastly amusing for the unexpected touches he adds to what might easily have been a routine rich man. He is droll in his perplexity, and endearing, as is the whole play.

Doro Is Sinister.

Doro Merande is remarkably sinister under a teaparty surface, as a woman who is too well-bred to seem surprised at the handsome Negro girl secretary, a Ph.D. who tutors the youngster and runs the singer's house. Neither is she outwardly shocked at Snake Tooth gnawing rare steak on the hearth.

The mood of this play is remarkably sustained. The direction insists that it act rational, when temptations toward superficial farce strew the plot. For me it was an extraordinary intriguing evening.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

January 18, 1951

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Fails to Add Up

ONE of the characters in "Four Twelves Are 48" aptly describes the proceedings as Osage fiddle-faddle. Although Joseph Kesselring, who wrote the hilarious "Arsenic and Old Lace," is the author of the new comedy at the Forty-eighth Street Theater, it is a dull whimsy. All the jesting of Ernest Truex, Anne Revere, Hiram Sherman and other artful players lends little humorous zest and impetus to a cute fable about an Indian coluratura soprano who is a great-grandmother at forty-eight and fears that the twelve-year-old tot of the tribe is about to bear a child.

* * *

The company is not at fault. Figures of amusing dimensions emerge out of the contrived nonsense of the plot, notably Truex's old Uncle Snake Tooth, an Oklahoma oil tycoon who stubbornly sticks to ancient Osage customs, and Sherman's Philip Dupre, a New York social registerite responsible for a third generation of unwed child mothers. Occasionally the proceedings are lively as Uncle Snake Tooth calls pow-wows on the singer's living room floor. There is so little substance to the jape, though, that the interminable elaboration of the title's notion becomes as tiresome as the joke about the lady I saw you with.

* * *

Kesselring runs out of comic inspiration so frequently that he is forced to bring down the second act curtain on a bit of stage business involving Uncle Snake Tooth's blowing his nose so noisily that the singer's suitor things he is being given the razzberry at the unseen end of a telephone conversation. The lines are never very scintillating, but they reach something of a low when Truex is constantly asked to create laughter by mumbling profanities. "Four Twelves Are 48" is better on arithmetic than beguiling entertainment.

Back on Broadway after ten years before the cameras Miss Revere somehow manages to appear at ease in the part of the errant great grand-mama who starts a family fashion in infantile pregnancies. Joshua Shelley and Ludwig Donath engage with Sherman in romantic skirmishes which get all the unwed Osage mothers happily married; Doro Merande is acidly aloof as Philip's aunt, and Royal Dano has an engaging bit as Joe Hungry Horse, who developes a fondness for paste, but comes to no good end when he threatens an Osage squaw and her scalp-loving uncle. Otto Premnger's direction is as idle as the script. Good actors have dull chores in "Four Twelves Are 48."

The New York Times

January 18, 1951

Joseph Kesselring's 'Four Twelves Are 48' Put On Under Otto Preminger's Direction

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Joseph Kesselring, author of "Four Twelves Are 48," which opened, naturally, at the Forty-eighth Street Theatre last evening, was lucky enough to be author of "Arsenic and Old Lace" a decade ago. At the time malicious people suggested that Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, who produced it, had a keener sense of humor than the author.

After taking a glimpse at "Four Twelves Are 48," even a skeptical theatregoer might be inclined to think that the malicious gossips of a decade ago had their heads screwed on right. For Mr. Kesselring's current comedy is one of the sorriest episodes of the season, and Otto Preminger has matched the writing in his direction.

* * *

Nearly anything can be funny if it is written with skill by an original author and if it is staged with gusto and drollery, as "Arsenic and Old Lace" was. That is to say, Mr. Kesselring's plot might conceivably be hilarious in other hands. The "four twelves" of the title refer to three generations of Indian girls who have become unmarried mothers at the age of 12 and a fourth who innocently imagines that she is going to be.

Mark Twain and Bill Nye, working in shifts, might get something out of this situation that would not be both dull and distasteful. But Mr. Kesselring never strayed very far from stupefying dullness, and his sense of taste appears to be seriously impaired. Apart from the plot, he seems to have tried to imagine a household of amiable individualists like those who made history in "You Can't Take It With You." But it took George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart to do that job, working in shifts, relays and pairs.

No, Mr. Kesselring has no talent for fabulous skylarking, if we are to judge by "Four Twelves Are 48." And Mr. Preminger is not the man for amusing improvisation. The cast includes some actors who have been entertaining on other occasions. Ernest Truex, who was a gold-prospector earlier in the season, has now become an Osage Indian, grunting and snarling obscenities under a black wig. Anne Revere never had a worse role in Hollywood than the overbearing Indian matriarch in this play. Not full-blooded, apparently, for she has a redskin face and white legs.

* * *

Among those present are Doro Merande, who can be funny in happier circumstances, and Pat Crowley, who helped out in "Southern Exposure" last autumn. After a long absence, Hiram Sherman has come back to remind Gotham playgoers that he is one of the most gifted comedians we have. He is even amusing in "Four Twelves Are 48," which is what is known in the trade as "playing against it." Even if he never spoke a line, Mr. Sherman would look so much like a George Price drawing that he would restore one's confidence in the absolute futility of the world.

But "Four Twelves Are 48"—no, please!

DAILY NEWS

January 18, 1951

'Four 12s Are 48' Adds Up to Zero

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In the happily remembered "Arsenic and Old Lace" Joseph Kesselring demonstrated that his sense of humor is off-center, or goofy. His new comedy, "Four Twelves Are 48," is considerably nuttier—and considerably less a play.

Last evening's first-nighters at the 48th St. Theatre were as amiable a mob of friends, relatives and backers as has been assembled all season, but they must have been puzzled, too. I was, anyhow, and I was a friend. I couldn't figure out how so formless a work happened to get into the playhouse which once was the home of Elwood P. Dowd and his friend Harvey. I couldn't figure what Hollywood's Otto Preminger had been doing when he was supposed to be directing the piece.

There are declicious and delightful fragments in "Four Twelves Are 48." Couldn't help being, with such comedians as Ernest Truex and Hiram Sherman playing, and with some wonderfully screwy lines provided by author Kesselring. But never was a play shattered into more fragments. It makes a company of good pros look like amateurs.

There must be what the Hollywood producer called the mucus of a plot in the comedy. It vaguely deals with four Osage Indian females, three of whom had illegitimate children before they were 13, and the fourth of whom, now 12, thinks she is expecting. It also deals with Uncle Snaketooth (Mr. Truex in a tobacco makeup and black braids), who grunts, cusses, cooks steaks in a New York fireplace and has three Rolls Royces. It further concerns itself with a rich young man (Mr. Sherman) who in his absent-minded way has fathered the youngest of these females and is just reminded of it after the passage of a dozen years.

Well, I guess that's about all I can tell you—and I'll be darned if it isn't more than Mr. Kesselring told me. The valiant company also includes Anne Revere, Joshua Shelley, Miss Pat Crowley, Doro Merande and several cuts of real steak and roast beef.